

The US Withdrawal and the Scramble for Syria*

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Operation “Peace Spring” and . . . Chaos in Rojava

On 9 October 2019, Turkey ordered the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) and its proxies in the Syrian National Army (SNA) to invade Syrian Kurdistan (or Rojava) after a fateful conversation between Turkish president Tayyip Erdoğan and US president Donald Trump a few days earlier. The White House declared that the United States did not endorse the operation but would not obstruct it either. And as the unintended consequences, the most stable and peaceful corner of Syria was transformed into a messy battleground by an incursion ironically labeled “Operation Peace Spring.”

Amid an outbreak of protests and recriminations against the Trump administration for its “betrayal” of the erstwhile allies in the struggle against the Islamic State (ISIS),¹ the following questions must be answered: (1) could such a situation have been avoided; (2) how will this policy impact on the power and prestige of the United States in the Middle East and beyond; (3) what does this incident indicate about the use of proxies by the United States in the Middle East and beyond; and (4) how does this affect the regional balance of power and major powers’ competition in Syria?

With the benefit of painstaking research on the relations between the United States and the Syrian Kurds, this article will endeavor to examine a situation that is still unfolding and offer answers to the above four questions, while attempting also to identify winners and losers.

An Acrobat’s Act

In reality, this coming storm was expected, owing to the inherent contradiction of the overall US policy in Syria after the Siege of Kobani (2014–2015) and the start of a “special” relationship between the United States and the Yekineyen Parastina Gel (YPG, People’s Protection Units), a primarily Kurdish militia. The

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United States adopted a narrow counterterrorism mission (i.e., the destruction of ISIS) without particular concern for the future (and wider) implications of such a short-sighted policy. In light of the incompetence of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a decentralized band of Syrian rebels, against ISIS and the extremism of several of FSA units (formerly supported by the West), the Pentagon resolved to overlook the objections of Ankara and partner with the most trustworthy boots on the ground against ISIS—the YPG.²



(Flickr photo courtesy Kurdishstruggle, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kurdishstruggle/>)

Figure 1. Erstwhile allies. Beginning in 2014, US forces partnered with the YPG against ISIS in Syria. In 2015, the YPG joined other Syrian groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), comprising the SDF's leading component. Turkey considers the YPG to be the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a US-designated terrorist organization that has waged a decades-long insurgency in Turkey. Ankara has strongly objected to US cooperation with the SDF. While US officials have acknowledged YPG-PKK ties, Washington considers the two groups to be distinct.

As the Islamic Caliphate declined, the Rojava or Syrian Kurdistan appeared—to the alarm of Ankara.³ The emergence and expansion of an independent Kurdish state—especially one controlled by an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a Kurdish militant and political organization based in Turkey and Iraq⁴—was considered the top threat for Turkey, especially in the aftermath of the failed talks between President Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) and PKK (2013–2015).⁵ Turkey twice unilaterally intervened in 2016 and 2018 to disrupt YPG operations and piece-by-piece dismantle the Rojava west of the Euphrates River—even allying itself with Russia to accomplish Ankara's ends.⁶ Thus,

Washington was confronted with a stark dilemma: how could the United States satisfy the security concerns of Turkey and stop the rapprochement between Erdoğan and Russian president Vladimir Putin, on the one hand, and defend Rojava from Ankara, Damascus, and Tehran on the other hand?

A “prisoner of geography,”⁷ Rojava could be sustained only through indefinite US support. Thus, Washington oscillated between its NATO ally (Turkey) and its partner in the victorious war against ISIS (the YPG), proposing half-formulas (such as the “security mechanism” in August 2019) to avert a conflict in northeast Syria.⁸

A Perfect Storm

However, the US military strategy in Syria was subjected to two independent variables in this equation: presidents Trump and Erdoğan. The latter was steadfastly committed to dismantling Rojava and, if possible, expanding the borders of Turkey according to the “National Pact.”⁹ And the former, loyal to the “America First” doctrine, favored disengagement from the “endless wars” in the Middle East.

In December 2018, President Trump threatened to withdraw US military forces from Rojava after a telephone conversation with Erdoğan. The decision was suspended (not reversed as some might have thought) after the resignations of the Secretary of Defense and the Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition against ISIS. However, in October 2019 Trump surprised his cabinet once again—after yet another conversation with Erdoğan. With the Ukrainegate allegations prominent in the news and the American election campaign in full swing, Trump decided to adopt a “fight forward” policy that would promote his image vis-à-vis the US public opinion as the president who rejected the costly role of the “global policeman.”¹⁰

The decision for an end to the “mission creep” in Syria was expected and, to an extent, politically understandable. However, the timing and manner of implementing the decision created a “perfect storm of calamities.” The Turkish military and SNA proxies thrust into northeastern Syria after what appeared to be a “green light” by Washington, throwing the most stable corner of Syria into chaos.¹¹ Turkey capitalized on the self-contradictory US policy in Syria and the passivity of the European Union (EU) (which was paralyzed by the fear of new migratory flows from Turkey to Europe) and seized this unique opportunity to promote Ankara’s agenda: the neutralization of this alleged “terrorist threat” (the YPG) in Turkey’s soft underbelly through the establishment of a buffer zone deep inside the territory of Rojava (32 kms in depth and 446 kms in length) and the resettlement of millions of Syrian war refugees.¹²

The images of the war crimes committed by Turkish proxies and the displacement of civilians sparked an international outcry. Several member states of the

EU and NATO already imposed an arms embargo against Turkey, while the Trump administration eventually succumbed to pressure from the media and Congress and decreed minor sanctions against Ankara. After a six-hour meeting between Erdoğan and American vice president Mike Pence on 17 October, the warring parties announced a ceasefire. More of a face-saving move for mutual relations between Erdoğan and Trump than a genuine deal, this ceasefire would expire by no coincidence on the day of the meeting between Erdoğan and Putin. The message about who the rising power broker in Syria would be was crystal clear: Russia.

Scramble for Northeastern Syria

Though still premature, an assessment of the winners and losers of this crisis can be identified. Russia emerged as by far the biggest beneficiary. The tarnished credibility of the United States in the Middle East and the rupture within NATO amount, in an irony of fate, to welcomed gifts to Russia from a US president already accused of being too friendly toward the Kremlin. Hitherto active only in Syria west of the Euphrates River, Russia has now expanded its influence east of the Euphrates River in a sphere of operations traditionally under US control and acts as an arbiter between Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and the Kurds as well as between Assad and Erdoğan. And at the same time, Russia continues to consolidate its newfound ties with Turkey in the military and diplomatic area to the detriment of NATO.

Iran is another power that gained from the US withdrawal. Not only was the dream of an independent Syrian Kurdistan dismantled but also the United States was expelled from northeastern Syria without a single shot. Iran can now act more freely to secure the Shiite Axis (Tehran–Baghdad–Damascus–Beirut) and use the momentum domestically against its own unruly Kurds.

For Assad, Operation Peace Spring delivers a great gift: the withdrawal of the United States and the neutralization of a Syrian Kurdistan. Without having to fight, Assad recaptured strategic loci such as Manbij and the Tabqa Air Base and secured the long frontier with Turkey—with the exception of those territories under occupation by the Turkish Army and its Syrian proxies. Obviously the question of the price tag attached to such a gift ought to be asked. So should be the question of the increased presence of the Turkish Army and its proxies on Syrian soil west and east of the Euphrates River. Probably Erdoğan and Putin discussed the interrelated questions of Idlib, which is strategically important to Turkey where it maintains several observation posts, and Rojava and agreed to a quid pro quo behind closed doors. Since Assad is currently preoccupied with Idlib, he is most likely saving his answer for later.

Turkey is another winner. Although Ankara did not achieve its maximalist goals, it did accomplish a tactical victory—most notably, the legitimization of its cross-border operation against “the justified terrorist threats” and the occupation of foreign territory without the consent of Syria. Turkey can now sit at the negotiation table for the next day in Syria with several cards in its hands. These tactical gains, however, may be overshadowed by the mid- and long-term fallout from the United States and the other NATO member states and Ankara’s new “hostage-like” bond with Russia. Worse, the reference to the Adana Pact of 1998 in the Sochi Summit could result in rising pressure from Russia and Iran toward Turkey to pull out completely from Syria and even recognize Ankara’s archenemy Assad. Therefore, this win should not be overestimated nor be treated as absolute. Consequently, Ankara would need to sustain a wave of international criticism, part of which comes from within NATO member states and goes beyond diplomatic disapprovals. Yet, given (mostly domestic) trade-offs, this appears to be a price that the Turkish government is willing to accept.

Last but not least, ISIS is evidently a net beneficiary of the chaos in northeastern Syria. As the recent history of this group indicates, whenever chaos ensues (e.g., in Iraq’s Kirkuk after the ill-conceived Kurdish referendum for independence) ISIS takes advantage of it. And the escape of several ISIS prisoners of war and their family members from Kurdish prison camps due to Operation Peace Spring will only boost the ongoing ISIS insurgency along the Euphrates River and may herald the dynamic comeback of ISIS. Even the death of ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October of 2019 does not substantially diminish the group’s ability to thrive on the disorder in Syrian territory.

Who will be losers from the fallout in Syria? The Syrian Kurds are quite obviously the biggest losers. The Kurds strategically decided to ink an ad-hoc alliance with Assad—thanks to the mediation of Russia. The alternative was far grimmer, as the Operation Olive Branch in Afrin had made clear almost two years earlier. The dream of an independent Syrian Kurdistan is over, but the fate of the Rojava is not decided yet. Rather, it will be the subject of negotiations in the Damascus–Moscow–Ankara triangle. Yet, without US troops on the ground and in the face of a lack of political support, Kurds will most likely be helpless watchers of regional powers’ realpolitik.

Israel lost as well. Tel Aviv had invested in the disruption of the Shiite Axis and the debilitation of Turkey by a Syrian Kurdistan. However, the drawn-out electoral crisis in Israel does not permit Tel Aviv to react decisively in the face of Trump’s policy change.

Last but not least, the United States could hardly be labeled as a winner. This “Twitter-and-phone diplomacy” caused a rift between the Trump administration,

on the one hand, and the Pentagon and Congress, on the other hand. Washington's not-so-distant goals in the Syrian Civil War were the exclusion of Iran and Russia from northeastern Syria and the oil wells in Deir ez-Zor and the prevention of the ISIS's reemergence. Both of these core objectives have been jeopardized, despite the fact that a few months earlier the International Institute for Strategic Studies' *IISS Strategic Comments* had warned against such a pullout from Rojava.¹³ This hasty withdrawal sent shockwaves throughout the Middle East, since Washington had signaled just a few weeks after the assault on Saudi Aramco that the United States will not defend its allies. Putin's visit to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi in October signaled, conversely, the high tide of Moscow's influence in a region traditionally within the US orbit. Yet, given the complex and dynamic situation in Syria, Washington still maintains potential power to influence an outcome of the war, especially through the conduct of counterterrorist campaigns to take down reemerging ISIS and al-Qaeda threats. To do so, the United States would need to redeploy and possibly increase the number of American troops in Syria, a decision that is rather unlikely to be considered by the Trump administration in the election year.

It is also worth mentioning that European powers lost as well. Their inability or unwillingness to act is not just another blow to the EU's image as a potential security actor. More importantly, the EU, by distancing itself from taking responsibility for its nearest southeastern neighborhood, leaves security of proximate regions (both the eastern Mediterranean and the Middle East) to outside powers, namely Russia, Turkey, and Iran. This powerlessness was strikingly evident when the European Council issued a declaration on 21 February 2020 amid a renewed military offensive by the Syrian regime and its allies in Idlib, calling the campaign "unacceptable" and demanding "all actors to cease hostilities immediately."¹⁴ As the EU declared "its call for the situation in Syria to be referred to the International Criminal Court," Brussels did not offer any unified plan on how to limit the violence in Idlib or to bring the Syrian conflict closer to an end.

Withdrawal like Brexit?

The initial argument for the withdrawal of US military forces from Syria, according to the Trump administration, was about bringing home American soldiers after a "mission accomplished" against ISIS. In that light, it is even more puzzling to comprehend the White House's latest tour de force with the Pentagon's announcement on 20 October that US military forces will be deployed around the oil wells in Deir ez-Zor to protect them from falling into the hands of the Islamic State. Of course, this development only strengthens the hand of the Kurds in the ongoing negotiations with Assad (under the aegis of Putin) for the future of Rojava

and Syria. At the same time, US forces conducted three raids against ISIS with the help of the Kurds in areas under the influence (Idlib) or control (Azaz) of Turkey and eliminated key figures of ISIS—most notably al-Baghdadi.

The timing and nature of these operations cannot help but trigger various questions about the role of Turkey and the relationship between Ankara and the Washington. The adoption of a bill in the House of Representatives on the Armenian Genocide and the introduction of additional bills aimed at sanctioning Turkey will deepen much further the rift between the two uneasy allies. Meanwhile, Russia waits in the corner to pull Turkey further away from NATO. Turkey announced that it will deepen its cooperation with Russia and, after its exclusion from the F-35 program due to the acquisition of S-400 ballistic missiles,¹⁵ opt to purchase Russian war jets instead. And all these at a time of a deep crisis within NATO as exemplified in the recent leaders' meeting in London for the 70th anniversary of the most powerful military alliance.

But the two partners, Putin and Erdoğan, must both walk on a tightrope. The start of the offensive in Greater Idlib in mid-December by Assad and his government forces' rapid gains in January¹⁶ against the Turkish-backed rebel enclave and the support of two different factions in Libya amid the ongoing blitzkrieg by Haftar in Tripoli will put to the test the relationship between the two authoritarian leaders. Idlib, in particular, is the biggest test for the two leaders since 2015: Turkey will not allow the capture of the rebels' remaining stronghold in the north without a fight and even deployed armed convoys to the northern half of Idlib in an attempt to contain Assad's unrelenting advance.¹⁷ The ongoing escalation between Erdoğan and Assad resulted in the deaths of dozens of soldiers on both sides and threatened a direct confrontation between Ankara and Damascus—a development that runs counter to the wishes of Putin for a rapprochement between the two.¹⁸ Given the Russian air support for Syrian government forces encircling the Turkish military in Idlib,¹⁹ Moscow has put itself in a delicate position that could quickly lead to a collision course with Ankara. It is in Russia's and Turkey's mutual interests to deescalate any tensions that would put both sides on the verge of a conflict, yet given the deteriorating economic situation of the Assad regime, time works in favor of Turkey's more decisive stance.²⁰

The death of Iranian general Qasem Soleimani in January in a US retaliatory strike already affected the situation in Rojava. The tensions between the United States and Iran as well as the ongoing protests in Iraq resulted in a further entrenchment of the US in northern Syria. This, of course, caused the collapse of the negotiations between the Kurds and Assad. And, in an unprecedented act, the military commander of the Syrian Democratic Forces, Mazlum Kobani, made peace overtures to Turkey.²¹ A peace deal between the Syrian Kurds and Turkey

was always the ideal scenario for Washington, which would open once again the pathway to negotiations between Ankara and the PKK and allow the United States to extract its forces from the quagmire of Syria.²² Whether Ankara will respond positively to these overtures or not will depend on developments elsewhere in Syria.

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Notes

1. Steven A. Cook, “There’s Always a Next Time to Betray the Kurds,” *Foreign Policy*, 11 October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.
2. Aaron Stein, “The Roadmap to Nowhere: Manbij, Turkey, and America’s Dilemma in Syria,” *War on the Rocks*, 29 June 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/>.
3. The Kurdish-led local militias, backed by the US Air Force and Special Forces, were able to conquer 1/3 of Syria’s overall territory—including the capital of the Islamic Caliphate and almost 80% of the country’s oil wells and all the big dams of the Euphrates River.
4. The PKK has been intermittently fighting a separatist insurgency inside Turkey since 1984.
5. *Squaring the Circles in Syria’s North East* (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 31 July 2019), <https://d2071andvip0wj.cloudfront.net/>.
6. Turkey and the allied FSA conducted Operation “Euphrates Shield” in 2016 and “Olive Branch” in 2018.
7. An expert summarized the problems of a Syrian Kurdistan and Washington’s skepticism toward an independent Kurdish entity: “An independent Kurdistan is certain to be landlocked, rendering it unable to participate in the international economy without being reliant on external—and hostile—powers such as Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. That’s why, despite a deep affinity for the Kurds and their cause, the United States has always been clear—to itself, if not always in public—about its reluctance to support Kurdish independence.” Bryan R. Gibson, “The Secret Origins of the U.S.-Kurdish Relationship Explain Today’s Disaster,” *Foreign Policy*, 14 October 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.
8. Stein, “The Roadmap to Nowhere.”
9. The six decisions of the Misak-ı Milli (or National Pact in Turkish) extend far beyond the current borders of Turkey and were used as the basis of the territorial demands of Turkey in the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923.

10. Peter Wehner, “Trump Betrayed the Kurds. He Couldn’t Help Himself,” *Atlantic*, 15 October 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/>; and Amberin Zaman, “Who Betrayed Syria’s Kurds?,” *Al-Monitor*, 21 October 2019, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

11. The Trump Administration repeatedly denied that it endorsed the aggression by Turkey; according to the president and his ministers, the USA did not approve of this invasion but would not avert it either (Blake, 2019).

12. Stein, “The Roadmap to Nowhere.”

13. In January 2019, this document argued that withdrawal from Syria would severely disrupt Washington’s Middle East policy, stating, “The US and its European partners have failed to achieve any of their goals in Syria. Several Arab states are attempting a rapprochement with the Assad regime. Russia has emerged as a regional mediator, and Iran is in a strong position to shape Syria’s future.” “The US Withdrawal from Syria,” *IISS Strategic Comments* 25, no. 1 (2019): <https://www.iiss.org/>.

14. Declaration of the European Council on the situation in Idlib, 21 February 2020, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/>.

15. The USA had repeatedly warned Turkey that such an acquisition would lead to its expulsion from the F-35 program. Lara Seligman, “U.S. Lawmakers Move to Punish Turkey for Buying Russian Missile System,” *Foreign Policy*, 10 December 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/>.

16. Assad just bypassed the Turkish military outposts in Idlib, making them in effect “hostages”. Fehim Tastekin, “Turkey’s Hands Tied as Syrian Army Makes Gains in Idlib,” *Al Monitor*, 31 January 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

17. By February 10, Assad had captured 35% of Idlib and the M5 Highway. Diego Cupolo, “Erdogan vies for leverage in Syria’s Idlib as Turkish troops reinforce positions,” *Al Monitor*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

18. Kirill Semenov, “Intel: Turkish demands on Idlib complicate Russia’s pursuit of compromise,” *Al Monitor*, 11 February 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

19. Carlotta Gall, Syrian Attacks Draw Turkey Deeper into Syrian War, *New York Times*, 12 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/>.

20. Jennifer Cafarella, Time to Recommit to Syria, *Foreign Affairs*, February 18, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/>.

21. Amberin Zaman, “SDF Commander Says Kurds Ready for Dialogue if Ankara Is Sincere,” *Al Monitor*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/>.

22. If Turkey agrees to open direct negotiations with the YPG, it will not be the first time. Back when the “solution process” (2013–2015) had been launched by Erdogan for a peace deal between the PKK and Turkey, a delegation by the YPG had visited Turkey. Spyridon Plakoudas, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Turkey: The New PKK* (New York: Palgrave–Macmillan, 2018), 43–58.

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